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“Immersive” heritage encounters

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“Immersive” Heritage Encounters

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Keywords Immersive, storytelling, embodiment, site-specificity, experience

Abstract This article introduces and analyzes the immersive turn within museum and heritage contexts. Three immersive heritage encounters from the UK are introduced, which demonstrate practice being promoted and sold through the rhetoric of “immersion” and “experience;” *Traces* (2017), *I Swear to Tell the Truth* (2018), and *The Lost Palace* (2016). These case studies are used to test a definition of immersive heritage as story-led, audience and participation centered, multimodal, multisensory, and attuned to its environment. Although immersive heritage often interweaves digital and physical resources, its digitality, I argue, should not itself be understood as a defining feature. The article concludes by summarizing challenges for research and practice in the nascent field of immersive heritage going forward.

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1. Introduction

This article introduces and analyzes the immersive turn within museum and heritage contexts. It holds up for examination recent heritage practice that is being promoted as “immersive,” and explores what the positioning of it in such terms helps to achieve. It argues that immersive heritage practice has a number of key defining characteristics; it is story-led, audience and participation centered, multimodal, multisensory and attuned to its environment. It makes the case that although immersive heritage (as I term it here) is often infused with the digital - including in the case studies presented in this article - its digitality should not be understood as a key defining feature.

Increased interest and investment in “the immersive” is related to other concurrent developments that have been notable within the cultural sector. Firstly, a narrative turn, one consequence of which has been a broader range of digital and other media utilized in museums, and which has included attempts to diversity the types of voices and stories represented within heritage contexts.¹ Secondly, an affective turn^{2 3} focused on understanding better how museums make us feel, and the conditions under which those feelings translate into real world actions (or not). Thirdly, there is also evidence of a ludic

turn within museums, characterized by increased interest in the application of play and game mechanics across a range of activities.

All of the above developments are allied to the drive by many institutions to better position themselves within the “experience economy,”⁴ one where members of the public are seemingly, and increasingly, willing to pay for cultural encounters that are out of the ordinary; street games, outdoor and “secret” cinema events, or escape rooms for example. Given these developments, it is clear to see why the “immersive experience” has become such a seductive draw to museums and heritage institutions, perhaps especially so in what have been gloomy financial times.

Immersive heritage projects raise ethical and practical questions for both researchers and practitioners, however: What kinds of immersive experience and storyworlds can be built in and around museums? How closely tethered should those experiences be to the other interpretation available on site (the “authorized heritage discourse” to use Laurajane Smith’s term)?⁵ How might immersive encounters frustrate traditional boundaries between the factual and the fictive? How can those experiences be made accessible, and do they need to be accessible to all, and in perpetuity?

These are questions researchers and practitioners have begun to consider within the context of museum and heritage work,^{6 7 8} but they are more familiar for those practicing within (for example) the fields of games design or theatre and performance development, where there is now an established literature and lexicon for considering “the immersive.” There is for example a steady flow of scholarship exploring storytelling within VR systems and making a case for the value of immersive narratives in education, something that should be of interest to museums and heritage sites, the majority of which still have their missions oriented toward educational objectives.

In this article I activate that insight and scholarship in the analysis of a number of case studies from the United Kingdom (UK) with a view to accelerating thinking about and critique of “immersive heritage” in particular. The article is written from the perspective of a scholar-practitioner and action researcher who has been involved in the commission, curation and evaluation of a number of immersive heritage projects. It is informed particularly by my work on *With New Eyes I See* (2014)⁹ and *Traces* (2017) and my experience as a participant-observer in a range of other encounters including *Nightwatchers*,¹⁰ *A Hollow Body*,¹¹ and those used as case studies within this article.

These case studies help to elucidate the nascent field of immersive heritage, exploring the interstices of the digital and analog, the physical and the virtual, and suggesting ways in which immersive heritage can begin to meaningfully collapse such binaries. It begins with an introduction to scholarship on immersive practice, before introducing each case study in

turn. This is followed by the suggestion of some future considerations for research and practice in this area.

2. Mapping an emergent field: Immersive Heritage

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the charge that any and all heritage might *potentially* be understood as immersive. Alke Gröppel-Wegener, for example, paints a vivid picture of how the stark and stubbornly analog architecture of the Jewish Museum Berlin activates to immerse you in that devastating heritage in a fittingly uncomfortable way.¹² Silke Arnold de Simine elegantly describes how a visit to Mr Straw's House (a National Trust historic house in the UK) is embodied and felt, and how uniquely situated and powerful our own imaginative interpretations within the "spatial-emotional dimensions" of a site can be.¹³ Imperial War Museums' publication *The 1916 Experience* is full of high quality reproductions of maps, letters, diary extracts and (on an audio CD) oral testimony, that together create a rich multimedia tapestry of life at Verdun and the Somme. Pollock's Toy Museum in London creaks with the weight of the materiality and nostalgia contained within, and using no digital interpretation at all nevertheless immerses visitors markedly and viscerally. The Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma gives one person every month the opportunity to "wander the museum" unchaperoned for a full day as part of #MeTimeMonday, rendering the museum a playground full of moments that are unique to that individual:

"If they want to, they can roller skate or skateboard in the galleries, or take a nap in the middle of the floor, or fly a kite or do a slip-n-slide in the garden," he said. "We have 25 acres of gardens, where people can have picnics or read or set up a hammock. We want people to make this place their place."
(Jeff Martin, Communications Manager at the Philbrook.¹⁴)

Most museum visits in some way arouse the senses and the emotions, and all museums and heritage sites attempt to make the most of their environmental resources. Museums are spaces live with promise and possibility, but also risk and (often) discomfort. It is in positive, negative, and more ambivalent ways that (any) heritage can perhaps be defined as immersive.

This article however holds up for examination a particular - very intentional - type of immersive heritage practice. That is, bounded experiences (sometimes timed and ticketed events) that are designed with deep immersion of groups or individuals in mind. In promotional literature these opportunities are framed through their perceived difference from traditional interpretive techniques, and oriented around and articulated through notions of "immersion." Promotional materials for *The Lost Palace*, for example, propose that it constitutes an "immersive" and "intriguing" "adventure," characterized by "exploration," "experience," and "active participation." *I Swear to Tell the Truth* is described as a "thought-provoking and immersive audio-visual experience" that is marked by its "intimacy." *Traces* is

presented as “for the curious... the seekers of mystery,” and will encourage participants to “experience” the site “in a new way.” The heritage encounters under scrutiny in this article are then self-consciously and deliberately situated as “immersive” in order to nod to a set of experiential and affective qualities that will (it is hoped) characterize participation.

As has been noted, in exploring the term “immersive,” we can turn to literature from a range of disciplines and find commonalities in meaning and application.¹⁵ In defining immersive theatre for example, Nandita Dinesh¹⁶ refers to encounters that are “multisensorial” and that privilege a “participatory aesthetic,” and Jason Warren talks about “a form that gives the audience greater access to the performance... to become part of the artistry rather than just spectators.”¹⁷ Josephine Machon similarly refers to “all-encompassing artistic experience[s]”¹⁸ in her definition of immersive theatre, proposing that the form removes “the audience ... from the ‘usual’ set of rules and conventions;” in Machon’s case, rules and conventions that characterize traditional theatre attendance.¹⁹ John Bucher says in his overview of storytelling for virtual reality that it “is less about *telling* the viewer a story and more about letting the viewer *discover* the story.”²⁰ Although from different disciplinary perspectives then, scholars identify the centrality of the interactant (the person interacting) in immersive work, recognizing and celebrating their function as a creative agent, both within and beyond the piece. Indeed, in work characterized as immersive, talk about audiences or visitors becomes difficult to sustain, and talk about participants becomes more natural. Such shifts are not merely rhetorical, highlighting the importance of shifting power dynamics to processes of immersion.

It is notable that these changes in the discourse are aligned (semantically at least) with the ways many museums have sought to re-orient their own practice in recent years in response to robust and continued critique of museological representations and silences. Many institutions are now attuned to the cultural and political significance of existent power dynamics, and seeking to find ways of exploring alternatives. Immersive practice that centers participation and agency, that explores new modes of visitation (including potentially appealing to new audiences), and that works with different – perhaps more contentious or provocative – narratives, is appealing given these ambitions.

The above quotations highlight the extent to which immersive practice relies upon embodied interaction, the arousal of the senses and affective impacts. Josephine Machon notes that such work not only “demands bodily engagement,” but also “sensually stimulates the imagination, [and] requires tactility,”²¹ and in her 2009 book offers up the notion of the “visceral” as a way of talking about performances that simultaneously engage multiple senses.²² Gareth White concurs, noting that “bodily sensing is vital to sense making” in much immersive theatre.²³ A number of authors have recently been working with notions of “multisensory” and “multimodal” heritage as means to understand the ways digital cultural heritage in particular is experienced in space.^{24 25 26} Sarah Kenderdine et al. have proposed

the notion of “embodied museography” as a way of thinking about those developments.²⁷ Traditionally museums have privileged visual and textual resources, but with immersive experiences we see a (potentially radical) realignment so that aural, haptic, olfactory and kinesthetic qualities are also explored. In the best of immersive scenarios, it is hoped that meaning-making becomes a whole-body endeavor.

Borrowing from immersive theatre in our definition here then, an immersive heritage encounter can be understood as a bounded experience at the nexus of a story, the body and the senses. It is also typically site-specific in that the narrative will be crafted to respond uniquely to that site and its collections, emphasizing “the unique qualities of [that] location that cannot be transferred onto another place.”²⁸ In-so-doing immersive heritage encounters can simultaneously defamiliarize, and make powerful new connections with, that site for participants. It might be said that site-specific work has a particularly profound and fertile power within contexts as loaded with representational and historical potency as museums.

In the following section I introduce three immersive heritage encounters. They are used here to demonstrate the functionality and qualities of an emergent field of exploration and to test the above definition. In the final section I then introduce some considerations and provocations for those producing and researching within this emergent field.

3. Three immersive heritage encounters

Having noted that immersive heritage need not depend absolutely on the digital, I now introduce three encounters that do hybridize the physical and digital into varied “mixed reality” encounters.²⁹ This section centers encounters that are promoted and even “sold” on a proposition that they will immerse visitors in a new kind of experience, one that models the characteristics outlined above. However, the brief overviews also begin to tease out some of the challenges for practice in this field going forward.

3.1 Traces, 2017 (Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales in partnership with yello brick and Cardiff University)

Narrator: “We must enter the labyrinth together. Are you ready for what you will find?”

Traces (*Olion* in the Welsh language) is a site-specific mobile storytelling application for use at St Fagans National History Museum, part of Amgueddfa Cymru, National Museum Wales. It is available free to download via iOS and Android, and users can opt for either the single person encounter or the two-person experience where both participants are sent on different - but intersecting - journeys. *Traces* is a 40 minute (approximately) audio experience split into four chapters wherein an unidentified narrator directs participants around some of the lesser explored areas on site, whispering stories in their ear, asking them to look at the

environment in unusual ways, and to be present in it in new ways, also. To touch, to feel, to play:

Narrator: “I have been called collector and guide, the unraveller of thread. Surrender yourself to this journey, to the order and disorder, the clarity and confusion, the artistry and chaos. See yourself reflected in the tales you hear, and the people you will meet. Agnes and Rose, and the others...These are the stories that make the trees grow, they nourish the soil.”

As demonstrated here, *Traces* is grounded in myth and illusion, scripting users into an ambiguous narrative that meanders between past and present, fact and fiction. Participants are encouraged to enter into an experiment in multidimensional and multidirectional imaginative investment.³⁰ At times they are accompanied by Agnes, a young girl who *might* have played within the walls, but remains elusive. They see through the eyes of the sick and weary, the soldiers who recuperated on the site after World War One. Or maybe it transpires that they *are* that wounded soldier. In the two-person narrative, participants look into the eyes of their partner-participant, and are tasked with seeing them anew. *Traces'* narrative power is also shaped by its environment in that (as an outdoor encounter in the gardens of St Fagans) it is experienced differently depending on the seasons and the weather.

The experience involves interaction by participants, although the “performances” required of them are subtle, and (importantly) invisible to other visitors they encounter as they walk. This format has been termed the “subtle mob,” which helpfully positions it in stark contrast to the hypervisibility, noise, and frenetic pace of the genre of the flash mob.³¹

In this example the producers are not interested in layering another set of interpretations onto the site as many other mobile museum applications attempt to do, but in creating a mechanism to connect the site, the body, and the emotions in new ways. Nor is the ambition of *Traces* to recreate an authentic (or even near-authentic) past. As such, it is far from a proto-typical museum narrative, and quite unlike any other form of interpretation that a visitor would experience either within the physical or virtual spaces of this Museum. Participating is not museum visiting in any typical sense then, and neither is it audiencing. Rather, it is a visceral and affective mode of interaction, one where participants can feel their heart accelerate, and a process of unknowing is prioritized.

However, the ways in which *Traces* makes its connections for users (if at all) are not easy to anticipate, or to explore in the testing or research phases of a project. This raises questions about the extent to which the impacts of immersive heritage work can ever be pinned down and articulated in a way that is authentic to the experience itself.

3.2 *I Swear to Tell the Truth*, 2018 (Imperial War Museums in partnership with ANAGRAM)

Narrator: “You see a museum is also a set, a stage, and you are standing in it.”

I Swear to Tell the Truth was designed to accompany the *Syria: A Conflict Explored* exhibition at Imperial War Museum North, Manchester.³² *I Swear to Tell the Truth* takes place principally within the main gallery space, which is of course also a key destination for other visitors. As with the other examples introduced here, there is then an element of invisible performance involved for those who take part, as recognized explicitly in the above quotation from the opening chapter of the audio. Interestingly, this experience is not designed to take place within the Syria exhibition itself, but in the adjacent permanent gallery space, which is dominated by stories of twentieth century conflict. The reasoning for the choice of the permanent galleries soon becomes clear; this is an immersive experience designed to encourage participants to reflect on the IWM museum “project” more broadly, and to raise questions about conflict, representation, and the circulation of information that extend in multiple directions; across time, space and peoples.

Upon payment of £6 for this experience (broadly comparable to an exhibition entry fee outside of London in the UK), participants are given a smartphone which has been pre-loaded with content - nine audio tracks and a bonus track on a playlist – plus a 20-page booklet and pencil which participants will be prompted to use to accompany a number of exercises over the (roughly) 45-minute encounter. The experience is not an audio-only experience then, being also interspersed with other audio-visual resources, including within a purpose-built wooden structure where part of the last chapter is played out. The exercises in the booklet prompt participants to do a number of things while the experience plays out; to interact with people they do not know, to make notes, and to post those notes through a letter box installed within the exhibition space, for example. The booklet provides additional layers of documentation and interpretation, and serves a wayfinding function by way of the inclusion of a map. The juxtaposition of the audio and the resources in the booklet becomes a source of playfulness also; in one moment the audio appears to mirror the text on the page before diverging first subtly, and then more dramatically, to offer an incongruous and unsettling narrative.

This is not a typical mode of visitation then, and nor does it approach the museum itself as a neutral canvas. Much like *Traces*, this piece purposefully works to unsettle the truth claims that museums make, in so doing opening up practices of museum-making to scrutiny:

Narrator: “This is a place that offers up truths about war. And it does so with the authority of a museum of national importance.”

I Swear to Tell the Truth provokes participants to consider the kinds of narratives an institution devoted to war and conflict constructs, and to ponder how future museological representations on site might attempt to make sense of our precarious present-day geopolitical situation. As noted in the opening sections of this article, this is aligned with the ways museums are beginning to understand their political, as well as cultural, significance, and as such is a useful exercise in exposing those truth-claims to critique. Within what might be for visitors a fairly familiar context, the kind of focused or slow looking that the experience encourages (even as it intersects with the traditional patterns of interpretation on site) serves to usefully disorient participants.

These themes, and such active disorientation, could be unnerving for participants. *I Swear to Tell the Truth* is bold and provocative, yet framed to ensure participants are live to the rules of engagement. This question of framing is however an important one, as scholarship on immersive theatre and gaming has long argued.

3.3 *The Lost Palace, 2016 (Historic Royal Palaces in partnership with Chomko and Rosier and Uninvited Guests)*

Tim Powell, Digital Producer: “With *The Lost Palace* we want to take our visitors to the places where this history happened - and then, using new immersive technologies and brilliant storytelling, make them an active participant in it.”³³

Launched in 2016, *The Lost Palace* has widely been seen as a marker in the sand for immersive heritage practice - an ambitious production, especially in technical terms. A timed and ticketed event, audiences are greeted and encounter some quite generous framing from a member of staff. Visitors are given a handheld device and headphones. The handset is a mocked up charred torch which houses the kit, a symbol that soon makes sense as audiences begin their journey in and around Banqueting House, the only remaining part of the Palace of Whitehall which burned to the ground in 1698. Working at a site that is no longer physically accessible was in no way understood as a limitation in the design process however, as Tim Powell notes: “not being physically bound by a palace hugely extends the experiences of history we’re able to offer.”³⁴

Participants start and complete their journey loosely as part of a group, but their experience is mostly an individual one, and the choices made about which fragments of the audio narrative to access are their own. Participants are told that their torch is like an “historical surveillance camera,” and as they navigate the site where the Palace of Whitehall used to stand, are able to listen in on re-enacted conversations and events that might have happened in and around the Castle: the first meeting of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn and their clandestine wedding, and whispered conversations after the arrest of Guy Fawkes, fittingly

situated alongside what is now the Ministry of Defense. *The Lost Palace* thus immerses participants in fleeting and fractured pasts.

This is a mixed media experience characterized by fragmentation, and relying on an embodied performance by participants. They must move, and at times move at pace, in order to keep up with the soundscape, and they must position themselves and their torches correctly in relation to the built environment and the props that provide the narrative's staging in order to trigger content. In one moment the charred torch acts as a proxy for a sword, and in another it even becomes an eerily realistic beating human heart. The experience makes significant use of binaural sound as well as haptic technologies, most notably in a section of the narrative where participants carry the beating heart of King Charles I back toward Banqueting House. At this point, the group of participants watch from over the road as witnesses to Charles I execution which plays out in front of them (as it were) while the everyday hustle and bustle of Whitehall continues apace. As with the other encounters detailed above, *The Lost Palace* is an attempt to re-orient the gaze and the attention of participants for whom it is a site specific, embodied, performative, and unpredictable interaction with stories inspired by our everyday connections to the past.

One striking element of *The Lost Palace* is the extent to which the technology itself, while sophisticated and layered) becomes invisible. As was one of the stated aims of the designers, the technology that underpins the encounter does fade into the background rather than itself constituting the experience. This is intriguing in a landscape dominated by museum mobile applications that can be cumbersome and less than intuitive. *The Lost Palace* is however the product of a process that has seen significant investment of time, money, and creative energies from a number of project partners in the name of research and development rather than straightforward return on investment. *The Lost Palace* demonstrates the sharp end of possibility when it comes to thoughtful and seamless immersive heritage experiences, but also that they *can* be resource intensive.

4. Some challenges for future practice and research

These three examples re-affirm the definition of immersive heritage offered above. All the case studies rely in differing ways on technical infrastructures, but that alone is not what makes them remarkable or (possibly) radical as tools of interpretation. Rather, this is practice that foregrounds story, participation, environmental resources, the body, and the senses, in the context of heritage work. It is this assemblage that the promotional materials nod to as they employ the rhetoric of "immersion," "experience," and "discovery."

But there are a number of challenges that these case studies begin to illuminate also, and I contend that these will be important for consideration in future iterations of immersive heritage practice and its study. Firstly, the case studies highlight very clearly the importance of framing in these encounters. Participants may not necessarily be expecting an immersive

experience as part of a heritage visit, or if they do, may have little idea what awaits them. All of the above case studies have considered very carefully how they extend their invitation to participants, and what kinds of permissions they will put in place for people to explore, to play, and even to disrupt. Yet the participant performances that they elicit are to some degree ungovernable, and these projects are not without risk, so care within their articulation becomes demonstrably important.³⁵ Secondly, this unruliness reminds us that the impacts of these programs are ambiguous and hard to measure. It is difficult to anticipate how these encounters will be made sense of, and valued, perhaps especially in the longer term. Given that, as has been noted in two of the case studies here, immersive heritage practice can be a way of asking difficult questions and offering provocations on the very nature of museum-making, understanding its impacts should be a key objective. This links to a third consideration, the resource intensity of these programs. Immersive heritage “products” can certainly look expensive given the number of people that they reach, and if their impacts are difficult to quantify and/or understand, then the case for them can become difficult to sustain. In light of these two considerations, we should be working toward robust methodologies for understanding responses to such experiences “in the wild” beyond simple quantitative metrics which are the bread and butter of user evaluations and impact studies.³⁶

All of these challenges bring us back to a consideration of “experience,” and the knotty question of what kinds of experiences these constitute. At the furthest reaches of scholarship about “the experience economy” we encounter debates about “aesthetic” and “emotional” capitalism that we may also need to navigate in time. What is it that makes these encounters justifiable within heritage contexts rather than (say) theme parks or theatres? Should the “attentions” of visitors be sought through any and all means possible? What *can’t* immersive experiences do for heritage sites and museums? Such questions and challenges indicate that immersive heritage will be a rich site of research enquiry and practical experimentation for quite some time to come.

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